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ABSTRACT

Noting that recent changes in philosophy and classroom practices in teaching reading and writing have had a major impact on language arts instruction and have caused concern among some parents and teachers, this position paper urges a balanced approach that meets the needs of the children as well as the concerns of the community. An overview of a half century of change in literacy education is provided. The "whole language" philosophy is described and the basis for concern and controversy are examined. The term "emergent literacy" is discussed as it replaces the concept of reading readiness. The stages of student development in language learning are listed, and it is noted that the process of learning literacy skills appears to be similar in many different cultures. The stages of teacher development in literacy instruction are listed and the need for support from administrators is discussed. The core knowledge teachers should have calls for: a knowledge of the sound-symbol relationship that independent reading requires; an eclectic teaching philosophy that involves selective teaching of what children need to know; and the ability to teach multiple strategies for word recognition and comprehension. (NH)

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FLORIDA ORGANIZATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

TEACHING LANGUAGE ARTS IN FLORIDA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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A Position Statement
Adopted October 28, 1993

In the past decade, changes in philosophy and classroom practices in teaching reading and writing have had a major impact on language arts instruction in elementary schools. The instructional changes have brought many new terms into the professional vocabulary of today's teachers and administrators: **emergent literacy, whole language, integrated curriculum, "big books," literature-centered instruction, discovery learning, humanistic environment, and holistic-constructivist learning.** Basal readers, skills worksheets, minimum competency testing, classroom management systems, and systematic phonics exercises have been discontinued or deemphasized. Classrooms have become decidedly more child-centered, characterized by stimulating activities, acceptance of individual differences, and a warm, nurturing environment. Student failure and retention in grade have been reduced in many schools, and teachers often remark that "teaching and learning are fun again."

Parents, teachers, and administrators have expressed positive reactions to the changes in language arts instruction, and there is little likelihood of an imminent return to drill and practice in reading, writing, and spelling.

> Unfortunately, American education has long been plagued by a pedagogic version of Newton's third law of motion--every action seems to generate an opposite reaction. The very success of whole language instruction carries with it the probability of a negative response from some teachers who are uncomfortable with it, parents who don't understand it, and administrators who must defend it (Sherwood, 1992).

Concerns about the content and methodology of whole language teaching are beginning to surface. Some teachers and some parent groups have challenged the changes in curriculum. In a few districts there are efforts to return language arts instruction to a more systematic, teacher-directed educational program. The purpose of this paper is to urge a balanced approach to elementary language arts that will meet the individual interests and needs of children, while assuring the community of progress toward higher levels of student achievement.

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A Half Century of Change in Literacy Education

American education, particularly language arts instruction, has undergone dramatic changes in the last half of the twentieth century. Teachers have been derided for being too directive, not directive enough, for teaching too much phonics, for failing to teach phonics at all, for drilling students on language conventions, and for accepting invented spelling and punctuation. Considering the interplay of conflicting forces, there is little wonder that teachers and administrators are confused about their professional responsibilities in curriculum and instruction. A brief summary of the trends in literacy education since 1950 may be useful.

From the 1920's into the early 1950's, elementary education still had many of the characteristics of the child-centered progressive education philosophy of John Dewey. Whole-word teaching, which began to make inroads into reading instruction in the nineteenth century, became the norm. Basal reading series dominated the instructional program, with carefully controlled vocabularies and slow, repetitive practice in reading simple stories. The basal reading manual was often the primary source of training for elementary teachers. Writing was largely confined to penmanship, although language experience reading and writing were found in some classrooms. Individualized reading received some attention, but frequently consisted of self-selected silent reading of easy trade books.

The middle of the decade brought bitter attacks on the status quo in public school education. Flesch's ***Why Johnny Can't Read*** (1955) accused educators and publishers of conspiring to defraud American students by withholding intensive phonics instruction. This coincided with the Soviet Union's early success in orbiting "sputnik," which pushed the federal government into educational activities with the National Defense Education Act in 1958.

During the 1960's, the difficulty level of basal materials began to increase significantly, as did the amount of drill and practice activities. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, part of the Great Society movement of President Lyndon Johnson, injected large amounts of federal money into public school education, with much of it earmarked for remedial reading instruction.

The slow pace of improvement in literacy throughout the 1960's led to Florida's Accountability Act in 1976, with comparable legislative actions in nearly 40 states by 1980. Minimum competency testing of basic skills programs dominated language arts instruction until the late 1980's, when it became apparent that isolated skills instruction was producing little long-term growth in reading and writing achievement.

As is so often the case in education, the perceived failure of one instructional approach brought about a pendulum swing to the opposite extreme. Whole language instruction, initiated in New Zealand, swept across the English-speaking world with remarkable speed

and with little support from the education establishment. Individual teachers and informal support groups (*e.g.* Teachers Applying Whole Language [TAWL]) promoted the philosophy and learner-centered activities approach, sometimes with lukewarm support or even disapproval of school boards and administrators. University education departments, however, became proponents of Whole Language, and produced most of the early professional literature advocating the holistic approach.

Whole Language

As a philosophy, whole language is relatively easy to describe. It begins with the learner as the center of instruction, rather than the curriculum. Whole language teachers believe strongly that there are essential interrelationships among listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Children's literacy development should be nurtured through real literature and legitimate texts, not with contrived and managed instructional materials. The assessment of their growth should make use of authentic language activities, not artificial items on standardized tests.

Whole language, however, is less easy to define in its application to elementary school classrooms with real children and real teachers. The century and a half of conflict between proponents of part-to-whole and whole-to-part instruction continues to cloud teachers' perceptions of appropriate teaching activities. Disagreements have erupted between and among educators committed to improving language arts instruction. The result has been confusion and concern inside and outside the school setting. Teachers, parents, and school administrators have many legitimate questions about the effectiveness of language arts instruction in American schools that are increasingly under pressure from the larger society to produce "world class scholars" to compete in an international economy. Lester Thurow (1991), Dean of the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told participants at a national school boards conference: "The real trick you have to think about is not: Is my school district producing a better product than the one across the country in California?, but what is the quality of my product relative to Germany, Japan, and Korea and the other industrial competitors in the world? ...The comparison is not between neighboring districts, because that comparison is now irrelevant...Because if you can't honestly say you are producing a world-class product, you are not doing the job you were elected to do" (p. 43).

Emergent Literacy

The term **literacy** has a variety of definitions, depending on the social or political context in which it occurs. At one point, the U.S. Government defined literacy as the ability to read and write one's name. Twenty years ago, literacy was considered to be the ability to read and write at a fourth grade level. More recently, literacy has been described in its role as an exemplar of culture, with different levels depending on the needs, skills, and background of the literacy community in which it exists. Sociolinguists and psycholinguists have reported

an increasing body of research that underscores the complexity of literacy development from birth through adulthood.

Emergent literacy, however, has a more specific meaning in its use by elementary teachers. For most language arts specialists, emergent literacy has replaced the concept of reading readiness. Readiness for literacy instruction is a process, not a point in time; all children are ready to learn something about language at every stage of their development. Even in prekindergarten programs, children arrive with some language knowledge; they can listen and understand much of the conversation around them, and can construct language utterances to communicate their needs and feelings. The role of the teacher, then, is to provide a language-rich environment in which children can achieve optimum growth in literacy.

Stages of Student Development in Language Learning

Children progress through a series of stages in developing literacy. Holdaway (1986) investigated oral literacy acquisition in several countries, and postulated that language learning follows four steps:

1. Demonstration of literacy by a capable language user.
2. Participation by the child in a literacy act, with assistance as needed.
3. Practice of the activity without direction or correction--a period in which the language learner tries out language skills independently.
4. Performance of a literacy act by the child as he or she begins to feel confident (p.9).

The process for learning any of the literacy skills of speaking, reading, and writing appears to be similar in many different cultures. The language mentor may be a parent, a teacher, or an older child; the steps toward language mastery are still the same.

Stages of Teacher Development in Literacy Instruction

Teachers involved in whole language instruction typically report that they are enjoying teaching again because of the perceived freedom from accountability for specific skills instruction. At the same time, many teachers indicate that they are working much harder and longer than before because they need much more planning time for whole language instruction than was required for skills-based teaching. Effective language arts instruction in a whole language program involves more individualization, the use of a wide variety of print materials, and nurturing student writing. These activities are more demanding than following a basal manual and assigning workbook pages.

Regie Routman (1991), a classroom teacher who has written extensively about the development of literacy in young children, described her own move from basal reading to whole language through five stages:

1. I can't do this. It's too hard, and I don't know enough.
2. Maybe if I find out about it, it's possible.
3. I'll do exactly what the experts say.
4. I'll adapt the experts' work to my own contexts.
5. I trust myself as an observer-teacher-learner-evaluator (p. 27).

Teachers' Need for Support in Changing Literacy Instruction

Moving from traditional skills-based teaching to whole language instruction requires teachers who are willing to take risks with their professional careers. Many parents perceive any change from the way that they were taught as being negative; they learned to read and write and have been successful as adults, and they believe that any shift in educational programs will be damaging to their children. Sanacore (1990) pointed out the need for administrative support for teachers who are attempting to modify their language arts programs:

> Administrators should realize that whole language is a multidimensional belief system, that everyone involved in its implementation must become a learner, and that this process requires risk-taking in a supportive environment. Principals can provide such support by working cooperatively with teachers during every phase of implementation. Guidelines are: (1) form study groups for the purpose of sharing information; (2) develop a firm belief in emerging literacy; (3) treat independent reading as an important activity rather than as a frill; (4) encourage the teaching of vocabulary through reading immersion; (5) support teachers' demonstration activities that reinforce the role of context for expanding word knowledge, and (6) focus on informal evaluation that is well-matched with instruction.

Core Knowledge for Teachers

In the flurry of enthusiasm for a new-found freedom in language arts instruction, it is essential that educators acknowledge their roots. Every swing of the educational pendulum has had a reasonable beginning, and every movement has been battered by its own deficiencies. Teachers committed to emergent literacy instruction and teachers for whom whole language is a new credo must still have a foundation in the essential principles that underlie written English: it is an alphabetic language in which letters represent spoken sounds. For a plethora of historical and geographical reasons, the sound-symbol relationships are not perfect; however, research suggests that 80 to 85 percent of the time, the letter sounds are reasonably valid. Teachers must know this, and must be aware that independent reading requires their students to have some strategies for recognizing unfamiliar words.

Whole language advocates run the gamut from anti-phonics to the realization that some word attack skills are necessary for students to become effective users of language. An extremist approach that rejects teaching word-recognition strategies will eventually doom whole language instruction. University education departments, which have been in the forefront of changes in teaching methods, must still imbue their students with an understanding of the entire scope of language learning. To do less is to send them into the international arena without armor and weapons.

Teaching Children, Not Programs

The overwhelming need in elementary education today is for teachers whose instructional focus is on ***children***, not on a philosophy or methodology. The term that best defines this focus is ***eclectic***, a teaching philosophy that involves selective teaching of what children need to know. Every approach to language arts instruction in the past half-century has had some good points and some disadvantages. The intelligent and informed educator at any level will select those skills and strategies that his or her students need, even if those choices seem to conflict with a particular philosophy.

Multiple Strategies

The repertoire of instructional techniques for professional elementary teachers must include the ability to teach multiple strategies for word recognition and comprehension. Phonics and structural analysis are not antithetical to whole language instruction; indeed, they are essential if whole language is to be truly whole. And recognition of the public expectation for instruction in decoding skills is just as important for teachers in their contacts with parents.

Children who are developing their abilities to cope with language in print, in both reading and writing, need instruction in three strategies that assist both comprehension and word recognition. These are (1) semantic cues, (2) syntactic cues, and (3) graphophonemic cues. All three are essential skills for readers and writers at every stage of development, and capable readers use them routinely and simultaneously.

1. Semantic cues involve ***meaning:*** what makes sense? What was the author saying? Can the unfamiliar word be figured out by the context of the sentence?
2. Syntactic cues deal with ***word usage:*** is the unfamiliar word a noun, a verb, an adjective? Recognizing the relationship among the words in a sentence is an important cue to the meaning of an unfamiliar word.
3. Graphophonemic cues use the ***sound-symbol relationships*** in the English language, usually denoted as ***phonics***, to help students recognize words that are in their oral vocabularies. It is the lack of instruction in this strategy that worries many parents whose children are involved in whole language instruction.

What is phonics? By definition, phonics is the practice of converting print into speech by vocalizing the sounds of the letters that make up words. These sounds are blended together as the word is pronounced, resulting in a recognizable oral utterance: "***kuh...aah...tuh***" spells ***cat***. The process appears to be simple; if schools would only teach children to sound out words, reading would be easy for everyone. Unfortunately, this simple scenario does not work very well. As Arthur Heilman, the author of ***Phonics in Proper Perspective*** (1969) once commented: "Phonics is very simple--if you know what the words are!"

Phonics is effective in beginning reading with one-syllable words that have regular sound-symbol relationships. ***Cat, bad, sun, hat, big, hot, sit,and jet*** can all be decoded to speech by applying knowledge of consonant and short vowel sounds. However, as the length and complexity of words increases, phonics begins to lose its value. For that reason, the Commission on Reading, in ***Becoming a Nation of Readers*** (1985) concluded that phonics should be taught at the beginning of reading instruction: "Do it early. Keep it simple. Except in cases of diagnosed individual need, phonics instruction should be completed by the end of second grade" (p. 43).

As the reading vocabulary increases, the rules governing long and short vowels, consonant sounds, and silent letters become less and less accurate. What works for ***tug*** doesn't help much with ***tough,*** and being able to decode ***quick*** doesn't ensure that the reader will be able to pronounce ***quiche***. Even in the primary grades, teachers must teach a large number of sight words: phonics rules have little application to ***mother, who, dough, tonight*** and hundreds of other words that are necessary for reading in the early grades. It is unfortunate that some producers of phonics workbooks and audiotapes prey on the concerns of parents to induce them to purchase expensive and ineffective products.

As students progress through the elementary grades into middle and high school, they must develop another skill that will enable them to analyze words in print into speech. That skill is ***linguistic chunking***: using recognized parts of a word to help decipher the pronunciation of an unfamiliar word in print. However, it must be remembered that reading is not just pronouncing words.

Reading, first, last, and always, means ***comprehension***. Research has demonstrated beyond question that the single most important factor in reading comprehension is the reader's prior knowledge: what the reader brings to the page in the way of earlier experiences, previous reading, and general information far outweighs the ability to pronounce the words in the text.

Role of Instructional Materials

Elementary language arts instruction should involve the use of a wide array of materials. Although many whole language advocates refer to the program as "literature based," there is no logical reason why other print materials cannot be used. Science and social studies

books have a considerable fascination for youngsters who are curious about the world around them. There is no rationale for excluding subject-area materials from the whole language program. Children need to read, read, and read some more if they are to develop their literacy skills to their highest potential. The content of their reading materials matters little; the application of reading comprehension skills is all-important.

Publishers of basal reading series, to their credit, have made a major effort to upgrade their products to meet the change in language arts instruction in Florida. Most basal readers today contain original, unedited samples of high-quality literature.

Inevitably, the readability of student materials has become uneven; unless texts are modified, the vocabulary and writing style of individual authors will differ significantly. But this should be considered as appropriate instruction: in their middle and high school years, today's students will be exposed to materials that are not limited to a particular level. One of the responsibilities of the elementary schools is the preparation of their students to deal with the demands that lie ahead of them. Literature alone, despite its many virtues, cannot always meet that need.

Assessment and Testing in Language Arts

The whole language movement has generated a concern for the way in which children's progress is assessed. The Florida *State Student Assessment Tests,* which evaluated student mastery of minimum competency skills, are no longer in use. However, school districts across the state make use of standardized test data to evaluate the progress of their students and their schools.

In schools that use a whole language approach to language arts instruction, some of the subtest scores on standardized tests are inappropriate. The test results that should be used to evaluate school reading programs are the comprehension scores; part-scores that evaluate subskills should not be applied to whole language classrooms.

Florida's ***Blueprint 2000*** document (The Florida Commission on Education Reform and Accountability, 1992) indicated that standardized tests would be optional in 1996-97 (p.35). However, the Commission's ***Transition System*** supplement (1993) states that "Norm-referenced test (NRT) requirements in grades 4, 8, and 10...will be continued, at least until the ***Blueprint 2000*** Assessment System is fully implemented" (p. 10). It is expected that many school districts will continue to administer standardized tests beyond the state mandate, especially in federally-funded programs.

A current movement in the whole language movement is toward portfolios of student work. The ***Transition System*** supplement projects the implementation of portfolio assessment for 1995-96, as well as the continuation of the Florida *Writing Assessment* test which was

administered to fourth and eighth grade students in 1993, with the addition of grade 10 in 1994.

Portfolios can be extremely useful in tracking a student's progress from month to month and from year to year. They can be used diagnostically to determine where individual children need instructional interventions, and they can serve as focal points for parent-teacher conferences. What they cannot do, however, is to provide comparative data on student or school achievement. As a result, it is probable that norm-referenced measures will continue in use for the foreseeable future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Language arts instruction in Florida has made some major advances in the past five years, due largely to the contributions of whole language proponents. Literacy development has been enhanced, written composition has been stimulated, and recreational reading has burgeoned. Teachers and parents have observed significant improvements in language learning and usage. Elementary language arts teachers should be commended, encouraged, and supported by school administrators in making the effort and taking the risks that accompany whole language instruction.

At the same time, it is important that teachers and administrators recognize the need for some structure in the language arts program. The nurturing acceptance of invented spelling and early attempts at reading print are essential to success in emergent literacy in the primary grades.

Nevertheless, it is equally essential to help children move toward independence in language usage. Word recognition skills should be taught, intrinsically or extrinsically depending on the needs of the students. Vocabulary development must continue throughout both elementary and secondary school years. Comprehension strategies become increasingly important as text content moves from narrative to expository. The long range goal of language arts instruction is to develop lifelong learners. "A balanced literacy program should include the elements of reading to children, guided reading, shared reading, independent reading, and independent and shared writing" (Mathews, 1993). An eclectic approach to teaching, which meets the needs of individual children in the context of immersion in real language, appears to have the most promise for meeting that goal.

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